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U.S. fire recovery teams to join the Victorian bushfire effort

At the request of Emergency Management Australia (EMA) and Victoria firefighting authorities, up to 60 U.S. fire recovery specialists are expected to arrive early Sunday to assist Australia as it copes with its worst natural disaster ever.

“The team will include experts on burned area rehabilitation, incidence management, aviation support and mid-and senior-level management-- all areas identified by Australian state and national officials as crucial in the aftermath of these unprecedented bush fires,” explained U.S. Chargé d’Affaires to New Zealand Dave Keegan. “Australia and New Zealand have been such wonderful neighbours and have helped us in our times of need-- we are happy to return that help.”

Of special note are two 13-member Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) teams which will be assisting the Australians to assess burned areas and damage to water catchments. The BAER teams include an environmental specialist, botanist, forester, soil scientist, hydrologist, geologist, and documentation and cultural resources specialists.

In addition to the 26 members of the BAER teams, other members of the group are expected to include:

- 20 members of an Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) who work in all phases of wildfire suppression.
- 3 planning specialists
- 4 operations and tactical specialists
- 4 logistics specialists
- 3 deployment liaison specialists

This American support is based on intensive consultation with Australian fire authorities, who identified a number of capabilities that the United States could provide. Such assistance has been a key component of the existing international fire exchange agreements and the U.S. contingent will be working side by side with New Zealand personnel also sent to help.

“International emergency service personnel are well-used to working together in times of crisis and right now our cooperative efforts are focused on assisting the people of Victoria,” said Dr. Keegan.

Just as New Zealand’s Prime Minister John Key called Prime Minister Rudd, so too, did President Obama.

“President Barack Obama this week contacted Prime Minister Rudd to offer condolences and U.S. assistance to Australia,” added Dr. Keegan.